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## EDITORIAL

**Peter McGill, Tizard Centre**

The two feature articles in the current issue might be seen as addressing different aspects of the business of providing high-quality support to people with learning disabilities. The article by Peter Bates and colleagues draws attention to issues too rarely discussed. Ultimately, all the fine words published in journals such as this or in policy documents are as nought if those working directly with people with learning disabilities are not able to support them effectively. Yet the staff in these situations are the least trained, the poorest paid and, when things go wrong, the most likely to be criticised. To provide the kind of subtle support discussed, staff need not just training but also continuing practice leadership from their managers. Supporting people with learning disabilities is not like making widgets. It cannot be done well just by following procedures, no matter how well defined. It requires that, in the context of a relationship with the person, and with support from their manager, staff are able to reflect, learn and adapt their own behaviour to the needs and wants of the individual whom they are supporting.

Edwin Jones' thoughtful commentary places the notion of support in the context of recent research, especially that on "active support". This research has, in particular, drawn attention to the importance of teaching staff how to support people with learning disabilities to participate in a range of everyday, meaningful activities. As Edwin notes, a particular contribution of this approach may be in its provision of a set of "tools" that staff can apply in their everyday practice. This process of application, however, is not a mechanical one and will require personalisation, reflection and adaptation by well-supported staff.

Communication is fundamental to the support process. If we don't know what the person wants it will be very difficult to help them achieve it. Celia Harding and her colleagues show how facilitating opportunities for communication can have a wide range of benefits both for the people with learning disabilities involved and for (in this case) the speech and language therapy students hearing their voices. The article also draws attention to the importance of facilitating communication using the range of augmentative and alternative communication systems available. This is a particularly challenging area for support staff. We all know how easy it is for someone's glasses or hearing aid to go walkabout in a residential care or similar situation. Similarly, we all know of individuals with a learning disability whose main communication medium is sign being "supported" by staff none of whom can sign. Jill Bradshaw picks up some of these more general issues in her commentary. Interestingly, she concludes that the inclusion of a greater communication perspective in approaches such as Active Support may be one way forward.

So we return to where we started. Some of the issues involved in good support are subtle, some are not. We often get both kinds wrong and we need to do better.